

**IDAHO CHARTER SCHOOLS**  
**Program Evaluation Report**  
**Year Two**

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## **Executive Summary**

The State of Idaho has had charter schools in operation for three years. A total of nine charter schools have opened since Fall 1998; all but one are in their second or third year of operation. Most of the schools are located in the more populated areas of the state. The total number of students served by charter schools is 1067 statewide.

This is the second annual report in a five-year comprehensive evaluation of the Idaho Charter School Program. It examines the charter schools on several quality and viability indicators. The information is based on self-reported data from the schools, site visits, and surveys of key stakeholders. Data are reported in terms of general characteristics, individual school profiles, survey generalizations and site visit reports.

The primary findings of this study are that:

- Schools are making progress on their goals. All schools have either met or exceeded some of their goals. The majority of goals related to student achievement (over half of all goals) were met or exceeded.
- Shared philosophy and small size continue to be two factors that make charter schools unique. Eighty percent of staff believes there is commitment to the missions of their respective schools. Charter schools have an average of 20 percent fewer students per teacher than their conventional counterparts.
- There is an increase in the number of programs or educational approaches being offered by the schools.
- Demand for charter schools in Idaho is extremely high. The waiting lists of schools nearly match (93 percent) that of total enrollment.
- Charter schools are bringing more students back into the public system. According to parent surveys, approximately 29 percent of students were home schooled prior to charter enrollment.
- A greater number of charter schools are taking advantage of scheduling flexibility than in the past.
- Schools are addressing the needs of special education students. All but one school has at least one special education certified teacher on staff. Other services being offered by some schools are counseling (two-thirds have it available either on site or through the district) and after school programs (five of nine schools reported availability).
- Parents continue to have high levels of involvement at all of the charter schools. Several schools reported having other community volunteers and business partnerships as well.
- Facilities continue to be an issue for charters. Only one-third of schools reported that they are in permanent facilities.

Key recommendations include:

- Encourage schools to revisit their goals and measurement of them, and rewrite them if necessary, in order to further increase accountability
- Vary the kinds of sponsoring agencies by adding an alternative to district sponsorship in order to increase the number of charter schools in Idaho

- Encourage charter schools to consider equity issues in their enrollments so that their student demographics are more reflective of their respective districts.
- Increase awareness of what public charter schools are about in order to: (1) convey that charters can be more than “alternative schools” for at-risk students; and (2) change the perception that charter schools are “like private schools.”
- Revisit the evaluation process to allow schools greater flexibility in submitting data and distributing surveys in order to increase participation and quantity of data.

## **Introduction**

This document is an evaluation report of the Idaho charter schools program. The evaluation was conducted by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL), under contract with the Idaho Department of Education. It is the second report in a five-year study of the program; the final report will be completed in 2004. This report contains comprehensive school profiles, an indepth analysis of data collected from a site visit of the newest school (site visit reports of all other schools are included in last year's report), and surveys administered to teachers, students, and parents of each charter school. The report also compares data among schools, discusses technical assistance needs, and makes some conclusions and recommendations for future policy.

### **Charter Schools in Idaho**

Idaho is the 31<sup>st</sup> state in the country to pass a charter school law. Nine charter schools have opened in the state of Idaho since the passage of its Charter School Law in 1998.

This evaluation report includes the nine currently operating charter schools. Only one of the nine schools in this study was in their first year of operation. Most of the schools are very close to large population centers (see Figure 1).

The schools included in the evaluation (and their locations) are:

1. Anser Charter School (Boise)
2. Blackfoot Community Charter School (Blackfoot)
3. Coeur d'Alene Charter Academy (Coeur d'Alene)
4. Lost Rivers Charter School (Arco)
5. Meridian Charter School (Meridian)
6. Moscow Charter School (Moscow)
7. Nampa Charter School (Nampa)
8. Pocatello Community Charter School (Pocatello)
9. Renaissance Charter School (Moscow)

Figure 1. Location of Charter Schools Within Idaho



## **The Evaluation Model**

### **Guiding Questions and Philosophy of the Evaluation**

NWREL used three questions<sup>1</sup> to guide the collection, analysis, and reporting of data for this evaluation.

1. Did the charter schools accomplish what they proposed, based on their mission and goals?
2. Did their students meet the achievement levels proposed in their charter school applications?
3. What makes charter schools in Idaho unique?

With nine charter schools in operation, the U.S. Department of Education Charter School Grant continues to have impact in Idaho. Charter schools in Idaho offer unique learning opportunities and expanded educational choices to nearly 1100 students. Charter schools in Idaho also offer opportunities for educators to play new roles and test new forms of school governance. The ultimate success of charter schools in Idaho is, and will be, reflected in their ability to make progress toward the educational mission and goals to which they have agreed to be held accountable, as well as their impact on public education reform. Evaluation is a critical step in the successful demonstration of the accountability and impact of charter schools in Idaho.

This evaluation is guided by the notion that program evaluation is a process done *with* rather than *to* the stakeholders of a charter school. In order for the evaluation to be successful, it must meet the needs of the various stakeholders of each charter school, including the Idaho Department of Education. For this reason, administrators, teachers, parents, and students from each school are included in the evaluation, and the staff of the Idaho Department of Education were, and will continue to be, involved in reviewing draft documents throughout its course.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The evaluation process includes three principle components: individual school profiles, surveys and site visits. Each school provided information to complete and update its profile, which was started during last year's evaluation process (except in the case of Blackfoot Community Charter School, the newest school). The completed school profiles can be found in the School Profile section (see Appendix A). The instructions that were sent with the profiles are included at the beginning of Appendix A.

Second, evaluation instruments were designed to complement the existing data. Three separate surveys were developed to address the evaluation questions, one for each group of major stakeholders: parents, students (fourth graders or above), and staff (teachers, administrators, and any other staff coming into frequent contact with students).

All three surveys assessed satisfaction with the school and reasons for either attending, having child(ren) attend, or working at the school. All three surveys also listed a variety of statements about the schools with which respondents rated their level of agreement. The parent and

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<sup>1</sup> These questions came from the Massachusetts and Colorado State Charter School Program Evaluation Reports.

teacher/administrator surveys measured the perceived success of the schools in addressing their mission and goals and the teacher/administrator survey assessed technical assistance needs. The surveys have remained very consistent from year to year, with only minor modifications made to address issues that surfaced in year one of the evaluation. Copies of the surveys can be found in Appendices B through E. The mission and performance goals for each school were included with the surveys so that respondents could address questions relating to their school's mission and performance goals.

Parent surveys were sent to each school for distribution along with instructions and self-addressed stamped return envelopes for confidentiality. The three surveys were also posted online for those with Internet access; passwords were required for entry to the surveys. Students and staff in all but two of the schools took surveys online; hard copies were sent to the schools unable to participate online. A 100 percent participation rate was requested from all three groups. Return rates and responses are discussed beginning on page 17.

District superintendents or charter school liaisons were also interviewed by phone. They were asked about their opinions regarding charter schools in their respective districts as well as in general. Questions assessed perceived levels of impact in areas such as competition and innovation.

A site visit was conducted at Blackfoot Community Charter School. All of the other eight schools were visited last year. The visits are included to add depth to the picture of the charter schools in Idaho, and to provide a better understanding of the process occurring at the school, the attainment of proposed goals, and specific challenges as well as positive outcomes experienced by the school. Each site visit reflected each school's unique school environment and the arrangements that had been made by each school. This year, Blackfoot Community Charter School was sent a site visit schedule request so that arrangements could be made for the evaluators to meet with key individuals, conduct small focus groups (with teachers, parents, and students), and observe classroom experiences.



## Characteristics of Idaho Charter Schools

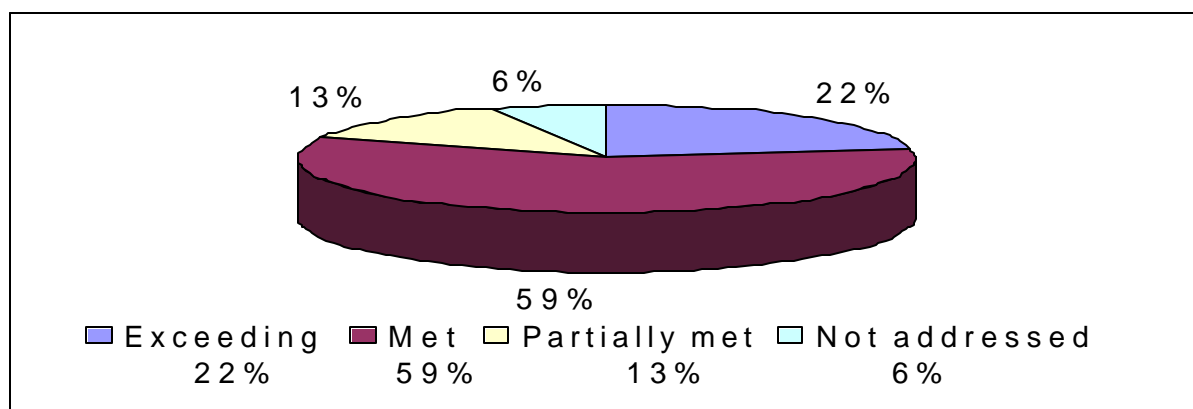
### Overview

In Year One of this study, profiles were created for each of the eight charter schools included in the evaluation based on a review of existing data (charter applications, grant applications, annual reports) and input from schools. During Year Two, each school was asked to update—or in the case of the newest school, complete—its profile with information from the 2000-2001 school year. The individual school profiles include data separated into five categories: General Descriptions of the school and its students, Educational Program and Assessment, Performance Goals, Governance, and Financial Data and Other Outcomes. General characteristics of the schools, based on the profile data, are summarized below. Each school's specific data can be found in Appendix A. Most of the schools provided complete and updated profiles; a few left some key items blank. First year profiles were used as baseline data for this and subsequent years of the evaluation project. It is difficult to compare Idaho charters to charters on a national level since the comprehensive 5<sup>th</sup> year report<sup>2</sup> has not yet been released.

### Adherence to Mission and Performance Goals

The number of goals of the charter schools has changed since last year. The range is now from two to 17, with an average of 7 per school. A few of the schools have made modifications to their goals, either to increase their accountability or to align their program with state standards. Goals are still primarily student-centered and relate to student achievement, personal development, attendance/retention, and student/teacher ratio. All schools have either met or are exceeding some of their goals. Of the 66 goals that were established by the nine schools, 22 percent were reported as having been exceeded, 59 percent were met, 13 percent were partially met, and six percent were not addressed<sup>3</sup> (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Levels of Accomplishment on Goals for All Charter Schools**



<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement's *The State of Charter Schools: National Study of Charter Schools* has been released annually since 1997.

<sup>3</sup> "Did Not Address" category included situations in which data was not yet compiled, the long-range goal conditions did not yet apply (e.g., no high school graduates because there is no 12<sup>th</sup> grade yet), or the data was collected as baseline data rather than as performance data.

### School Size, Enrollment and Admissions

Charter schools are serving between 17 and 266 students on site, and have a median size of 112. Five of the schools have at least 100 students. The total number enrolled in charter statewide is 1067, up 14 percent from last year. Five schools reported attendance rates; the average for these was 95 percent. The number of students leaving mid-year ranged from zero to 25 percent of enrollment, and reasons for leaving included lack of satisfaction with the program and moving out of the area. The total number of students on waiting lists nearly matches the total number of students enrolled in charters statewide. Two of the schools have waiting lists around 200 percent of enrollment. The average waiting list of schools is 141 students. All schools have open enrollment, though they have most likely placed limits on the number of students they can accept because of space constraints. Table 1 shows the enrollment-related figures for each school.

**Table 1. Enrollment, Students Leaving Mid-year and Number of Students on Waiting Lists**

School	Enrollment	Students Leaving	Waiting List
Anser	112	1 (1%)	250 (233%)
Blackfoot	55	14 (25%)	9 (16%)
Coeur d'Alene	208	32 (15%)	--
Lost Rivers	17	--	--
Meridian	143	15 (10%)	60 (42%)
Moscow	71	9 (13%)	5 (7%)
Nampa	266	1 (<1%)	520 (195%)
Pocatello	140	125 (89%)	0
Renaissance	55	17 (31%)	20 (36%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>1067</b>	<b>89 (8%)</b>	<b>989 (93%)</b>

Four schools had students that were dually enrolled with the local district, other high schools or local colleges. Three of these schools had high-school-aged students. Two of those schools each had one percent of their students dual enrolled in academic courses. One school had 20 percent dual enrolled in extracurricular courses, and the other had 78 percent dual enrolled in academic college courses.

### Facilities

Building types included new buildings, former district buildings, modulars, a doublewide trailer, and leased business space. Three of the nine schools stated that they are now in permanent facilities (last year, four stated that their facilities were permanent). Of those three, the two elementary schools stated they had around 50 square feet per person, while the high school had 112 square feet per person. None of the other schools stated their square footage. The national average<sup>4</sup> is 103 square feet per student.

### Student-to-Teacher and Student-to-Adult Ratios

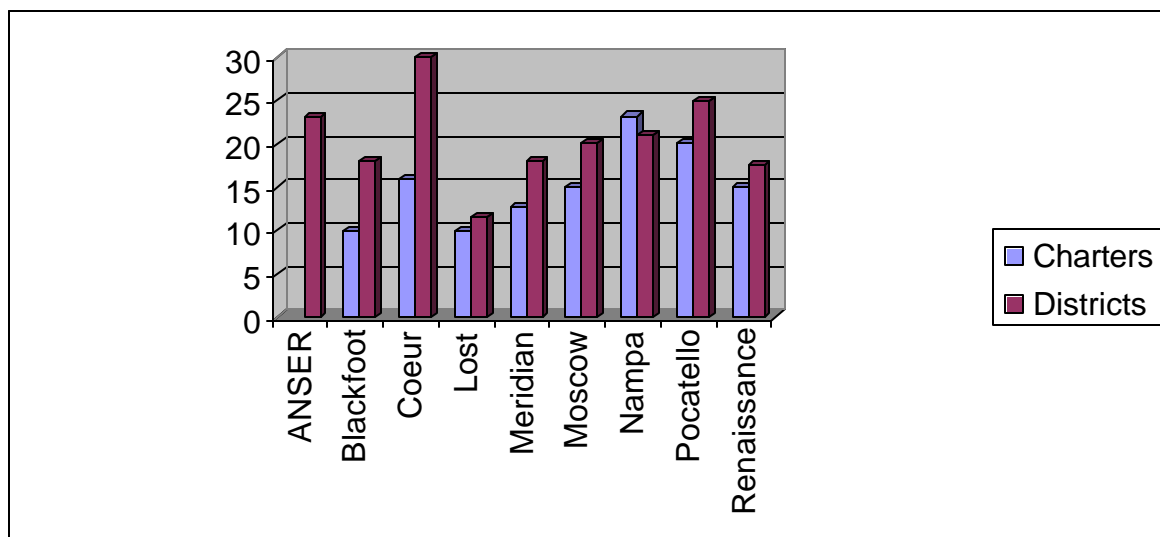
Six of the nine schools reported their student-to-teacher ratios. The average ratio is just above 16-to-1 (slightly up from last year's 15-to-1 ratio). Individual school averages ranged from 10-to-1 to 23-to-1. Figure 3 shows a comparison of charter versus district ratios (for similar grade

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<sup>4</sup> *Facilities Financing Survey*, Charter Friends National Network, 2001.

levels, where available). All but one of the charters that responded to this question had lower student-to-teacher ratios than their districts. The district average is slightly higher than 20-to-1.

**Figure 3. Student-to-Teacher Ratios at Charter Schools and Their Districts**



Five of the charters included student-to-adult ratios, since they often have parents assisting in the classroom. Student-to-adult ratios averaged 8-to-1, which is double the student-to-teacher ratio.

### Grade Level/Student Organization

Table 2 shows the breakdown of the number of schools serving various grades level combinations. The schools serve slightly more elementary than secondary grades. Four of the schools plan to expand the number of grades they serve next year.

**Table 2. Number of Schools Serving Various Grade Level Combinations**

Grades served	K-5 or K-6	K-7 or K-8	K-12	7-11 or 7-12	9-11
Number of schools	3	2	1	2	1

### Student Characteristics

Table 3 shows the student demographic data for the charter schools and their districts. All but three had within 10 percent of the district's minority percentages. Four of the schools had more free/reduced lunch students than their districts. The other charters had a much fewer number of free/reduced lunch students. This may be due to either lack of qualification for the program or lack of identifying students as such, the latter which may be the case if the school has no hot lunch program or capability. Two of the schools had a higher number of special needs students (with monitored Individual Education Plans or IEPs) than their districts. Again, reasons for these discrepancies are unclear. Only one school had Limited English Proficient (LEP) students; district averages ranged from zero to 20 percent LEP. Five of the charter schools serve children of organizers of the school. The average number of those students per school was five.

**Table 3. Student Characteristics by Charter Schools and Their Districts (by Percent)**

	Ethnic/Racial Composition							Free/ Reduced Lunch	Special Needs	LEP	Title I
	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Native American	Multi- Racial/ Other	Total Minority				
Anser Charter	92	1	2	2	0	--	4	8	17	0	N/A
Boise Indpn District	89	2	6	3	0		11	37	13	3	21
Blackfoot Charter*	47	0	2	4	2		8	62	35	0	20
Blackfoot District*	67	0	2	6	0		8	31	11		15
Lost Rivers Charter	85	0	10	0	5	--	15	70	--	--	--
Butte County Jt. District	90	Did not break out by race					10	56	14	2	100
Coeur d'Alene	Do not track and/or data is not available.										
Coeur d'Alene District	95	0	3	0	0	2	5	36	11	1	7
Meridian Charter	98	1	3	2	0	--	6	10	7	0	0
Meridian Joint District	93	1	3	2	<1		7	15	11	2	3
Moscow Charter	92	1	3	3	1	--	8	28	7	0	10
Renaissance Charter	98	2	0	0	0	--	2	47	5	0	10
Moscow District	91	1	2	3	1	2	9	23	12	12	2
Nampa Charter	95	0	3	2	0	--	5	9	N/A	N/A	N/A
Nampa School District	75	1	24	1	<1		26	50	12	20	20
Pocatello Charter	No data submitted.										
Pocatello District	87	1	6	5	1		13	38	13	0	0

SOURCE: Charter schools reported on their students' demographic information. District data was received directly from the district offices. Percentages may not add to 100 percent because of rounding errors.

\*40 percent and charter parents and 24 percent of parents in conventional public schools in the Blackfoot District declined a response to this question.

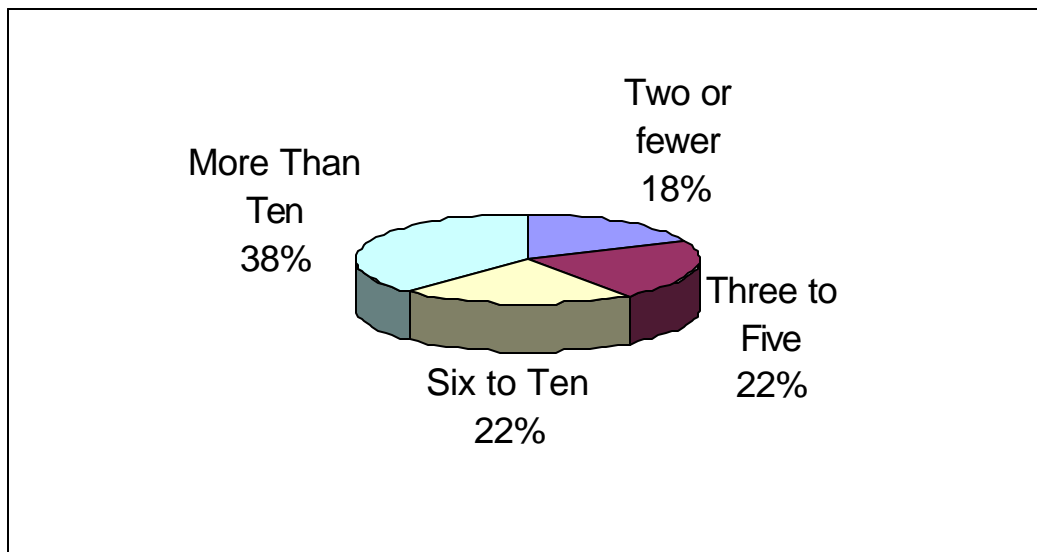
### Teacher Characteristics

The schools employ 45 teachers full-time and another 16 part-time. *Years of experience in schools* ranged from one to 34 years, with an average of 10 years experience. Eighteen percent of teachers and administrators had two or fewer years of experience. Sixty percent had more than five years experience and over one-third had more than 10 years experience. (See Figure 4 for an illustration of years of experience.) Nearly 25 percent had experience in private/parochial schools. Just under 50 percent had experience in conventional public schools, with an average of 11 years tenure. Other areas of experience included the district office, preschool, foreign school, community school, colleges/universities and alternative schools.

*Level of education:* Of the staff (teachers and administrators) that hold a degree, 69 percent have bachelors degrees, 22 percent have a masters degree and nine percent have a doctorate. (The remaining percentage have various specialist endorsements.) The majority of degrees are in the areas of education, followed by psychology and English. Four degrees are held in some discipline of science, none are held in mathematics. Eight schools reported a total of nine special education endorsed teachers. Fifteen percent of teachers reported teaching in areas outside of their endorsement. These areas included study skills, Spanish, social studies, science, computer networking, math, Kindergarten and physical education.

This year, four teachers have left their positions from three different schools, reasons for which included not agreeing with the philosophy of the school (in three of the cases) and health problems.

**Figure 4. Years of Experience in Schools**



### Schedule Adjustments

Some of the schools stated that they made minor adjustments to their daily schedules to accommodate events or teacher meeting times (i.e., early release). Only three of the schools appear to have made any major adjustments: two are on a year-round school schedule, while another extends its school year by almost two weeks than its sponsoring district.

## **Educational Programs**

Table 4 shows the educational programs used by each school and the total percentage of schools using each program. Over half of the schools are using the following programs or approaches:

- Character instruction (78%)
- Hands-on/experiential learning (78%)
- Multiple intelligences (67%)
- Foreign language at all grades (67%)
- Project-based (67%)
- Multigrade/age (67%)
- Individual education plans (IEPs) (56%)
- Technology as a major focus (56%)
- Thematic/interdisciplinary (56%)

Three programs had double the number of schools utilizing them from last year. Four schools are now using Core Knowledge curriculum, six are providing foreign language at all grades, and two have gone to year-round school.

As stated previously (Year One Report), most of these programs are not unique in and of themselves. What is unique is that each school practices, or at least aims to practice, schoolwide application of its particular programs.

## **Performance Assessments**

Table 5 shows the performance assessments used by each school. Some of the norm- and criterion-referenced tests are required of particular grade levels (see Appendix F for specific requirements). However, other forms of assessment, such as portfolios, are not required, though all but one of the schools are using them in order to track students' progress. It is interesting to note that seven of the schools stated that they were using IEPs as performance assessments, and five stated that they were using them for students' educational programs.

Six of the nine schools reported student achievement data. See individual school profiles (Appendix A) for more information.

**Table 4. Educational Programs Used**

	<b>Total % Using</b>	<b>Anser</b>	<b>Blackfoot</b>	<b>Coeur d'Alene</b>	<b>Lost Rivers</b>	<b>Meridian</b>	<b>Moscow</b>	<b>Nampa</b>	<b>Pocatello</b>	<b>Renaissance</b>
Multiple Intelligences	67	X	X		X		X	X		X
Character Instruction	78	X	X		X	X	X	X		X
Core Knowledge	44			X			X	X		X
Foreign Language At All Grades	67			X	X	X	X	X <sub>(4-8)</sub>		X
Individual Education Plans	56		X			X <sub>(Sp Ed)</sub>	X		X	X
Block Scheduling	33				X	X		X		
Extended Year/Day	0									
Alternate start times	0									
Year-Round	22				X			X		
Hands-On	78	X	X			X	X	X	X	X
Service Learning	33	X						X		X
Technology As Major Focus	56		X			X	X	X		X
Thematic/Interdisciplinary	56	X	X		X		X			X
Project Based	67	X	X			X	X		X	X
Multiage/Grade	67	X	X		X		X		X	X
Brain Research-Based	11		X							

**Table 5. Performance Assessments Used**

	<b>Total % Using</b>	<b>Anser</b>	<b>Blackfoot</b>	<b>Coeur d'Alene</b>	<b>Lost Rivers</b>	<b>Meridian</b>	<b>Moscow</b>	<b>Nampa</b>	<b>Pocatello</b>	<b>Renaissance</b>
<b>CRITERION-REFERENCED TESTS and NORM-REFERENCED TESTS</b>										
Direct Writing Assessment*	100	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Direct Mathematics Assessment*	89	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Idaho Reading Indicator*	67	X	X				X	X	X	X
Iowa Test of Basic Skills*	89		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Test of Achievement and Proficiency*	33			X	X					X
District/School Criterion Ref'd	33		X					X		X
ACT/COMPASS/PLAN	22				X	X				
SAT	11					X				
PSAT	11				X					
<b>PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENTS</b>										
Portfolios	89	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Individual Education Plans	78		X		X	X	X	X	X	X
TerraNova Performance Assessments	11			X						
Woodcock Johnson	11		X							
STAR and Accelerated Reading/Math	11									X
Selected Individualized Tests	11						X			

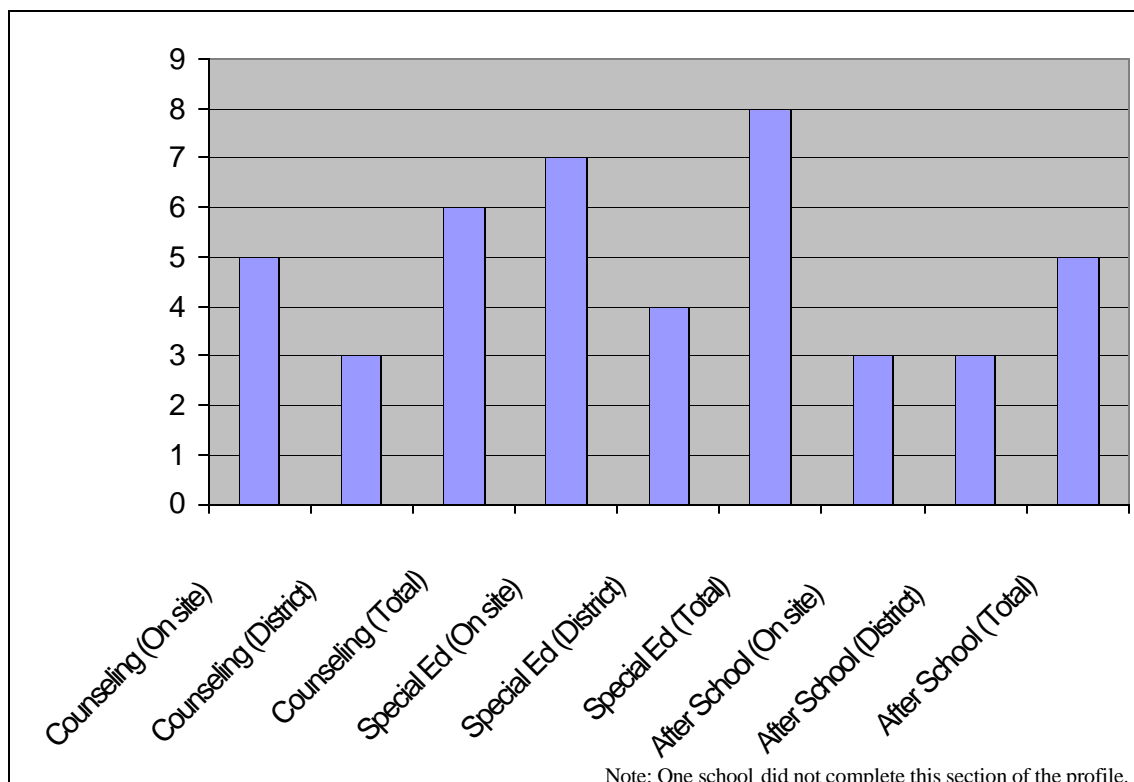
*\*Currently required by the state for various grade levels. See Appendix F for testing requirements.*



## Student Support Services

The types of services that are available to students included counseling, special education and after-school programs. Some schools were able to provide these services on site, while others accessed them through the district. Figure 5 shows the number of schools with a particular service available on site and through the district, as well as the total number of schools with the service available. (Note that some schools can provide services both on site and through the district.) All of the eight schools that responded to this question provide special education services to their students, primarily on site. Two-thirds provide counseling, again mostly on site. After school programs are accessible to students of five of the charters, either on site or through the district (or both). No other types of services were mentioned.

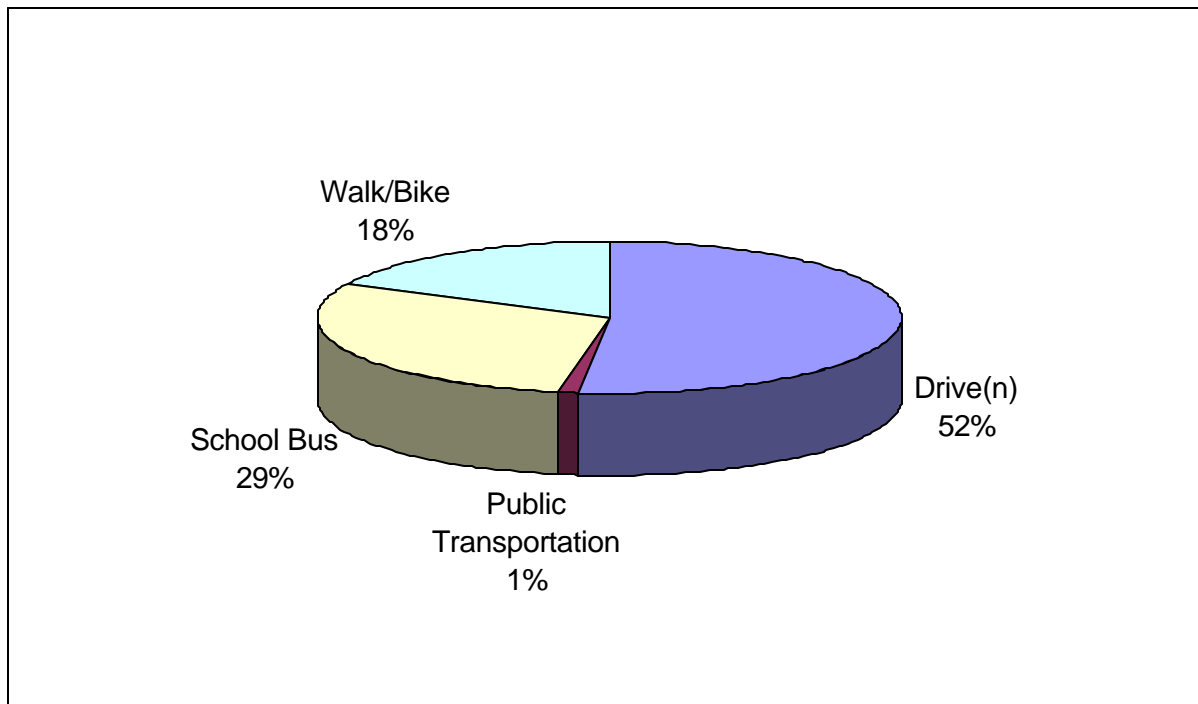
**Figure 5. Available Student Services**



## Transportation

Over half (52%) of the students at the charter schools are driven or drive to school. Nearly a third (29%) of students take a school bus, presumably one that is on a district route. Seven of the eight schools responding to this question have access to a school bus. Eighteen percent walk or bike, and the remaining one percent take public transportation. Figure 6 illustrates this breakdown.

**Figure 6. Methods of Transportation To and From Schools**



### **Lunch Programs**

Six of the eight schools responding to this question provide hot lunch to students, and all but one do this five days a week.

### **Governance**

Nearly all the charters have typical administrative structure with the exception of one that has both a principal (for instructional leadership) and an administrator (for business leadership). Board membership ranges from five to ten individuals. One high school had a board comprised primarily of community members. However, parents were the most prevalent type of member for all other schools, followed by community members and then staff. No students were reported as board members. Committees (in addition to board subcommittees) included parent advisory/PTO, financial, academic, student, grounds and facilities, technology, library, board (responsible for nominations, etc.), communications, and community involvement.

### **Parent and Volunteer Involvement**

All schools reported parent involvement (with the exception of one school that did not complete this section of the profile). Number of hours per month ranged widely. It is possible that the question was interpreted as hours per year. Only two schools responded with the percentage of parents that they believed were involved at the school (40% and 50%, respectively). While Idaho law does not allow charter schools to mandate parent involvement, they seem to be successful in getting parents involved (though they are apparently not tracking the involvement). Other volunteers are also utilized, as was reported by seven of the schools.

### **Business Partnerships**

Four schools reported having partnerships with local businesses. The number of these partnerships ranged from three to 20.

## Funding

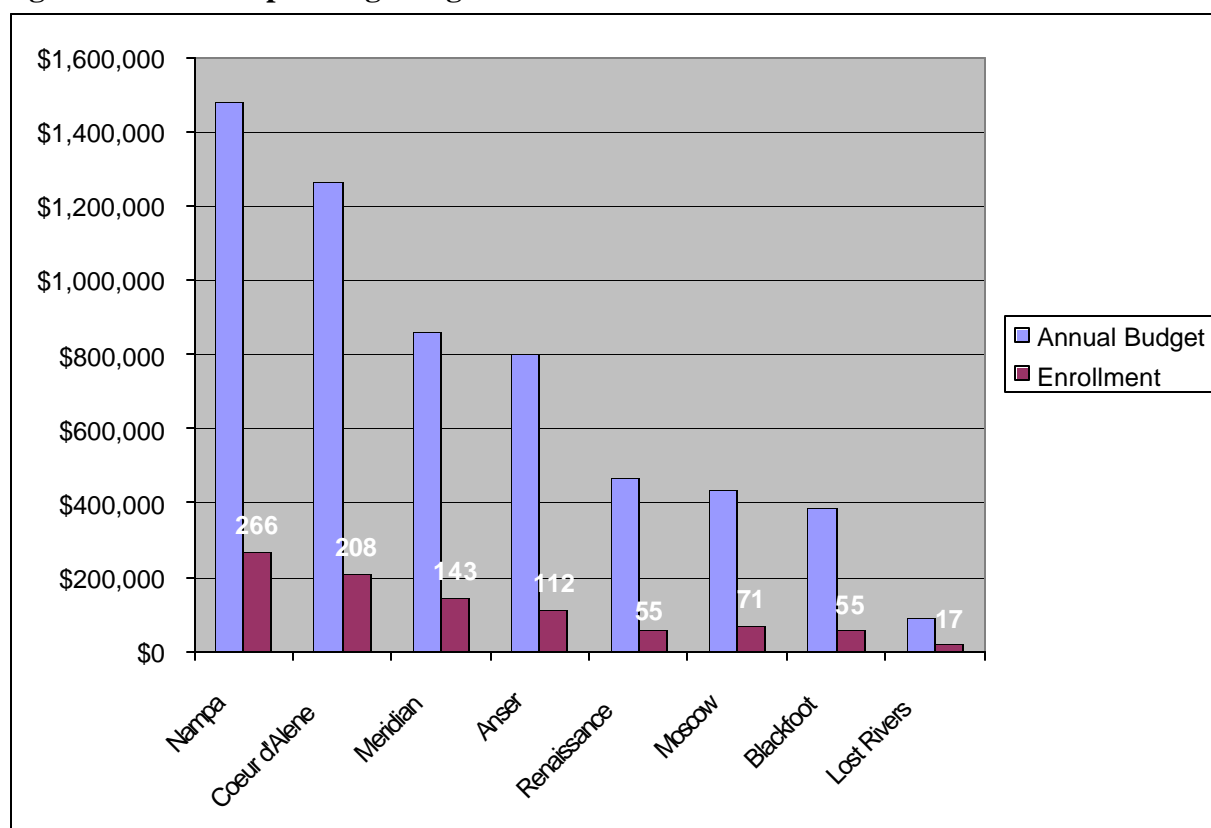
Schools' annual operating budgets ranged from \$89,000 to \$1,480,150 (for the eight schools reporting), with seven having budgets over \$400,000. Figure 7 shows the annual operating budget for each school and is accompanied by enrollment figures (in white). Actual budget figures for each school can be found in the individual school profiles. Cost per student ranged from \$3,500 to \$8,520 annually, with two-thirds of the schools spending at least \$6,000 (see Figure 8).

Budgets are primarily comprised of state/district funding. Other types of funding included local grants (which accounted for the majority of additional funding received by schools), donations, professional technical and tax revenues (only one school reported receiving this). See Figure 9 for a breakdown of additional funding received by schools.

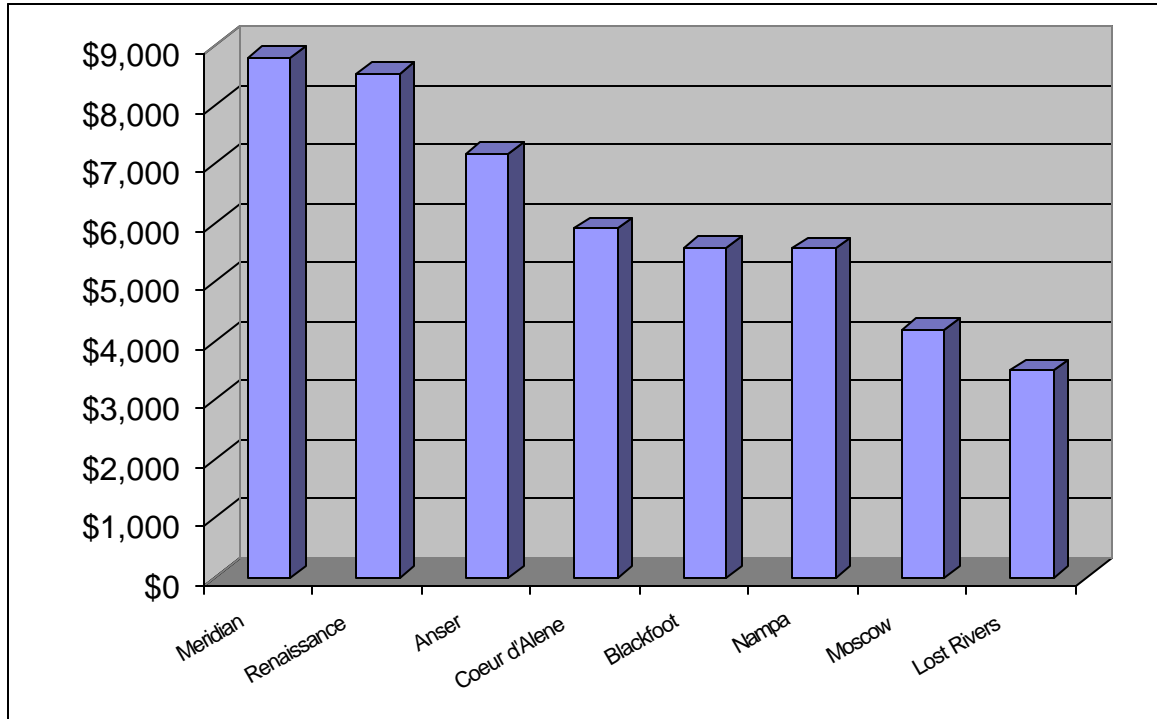
Six of the schools reported that they have identified students for additional federal funding (e.g., Title I). However, only one school stated that it is receiving all of the funding or services to which they are entitled. Two schools participate in discussions with their districts regarding the additional federal dollars will be spent.

None of the charters reported having any debt.

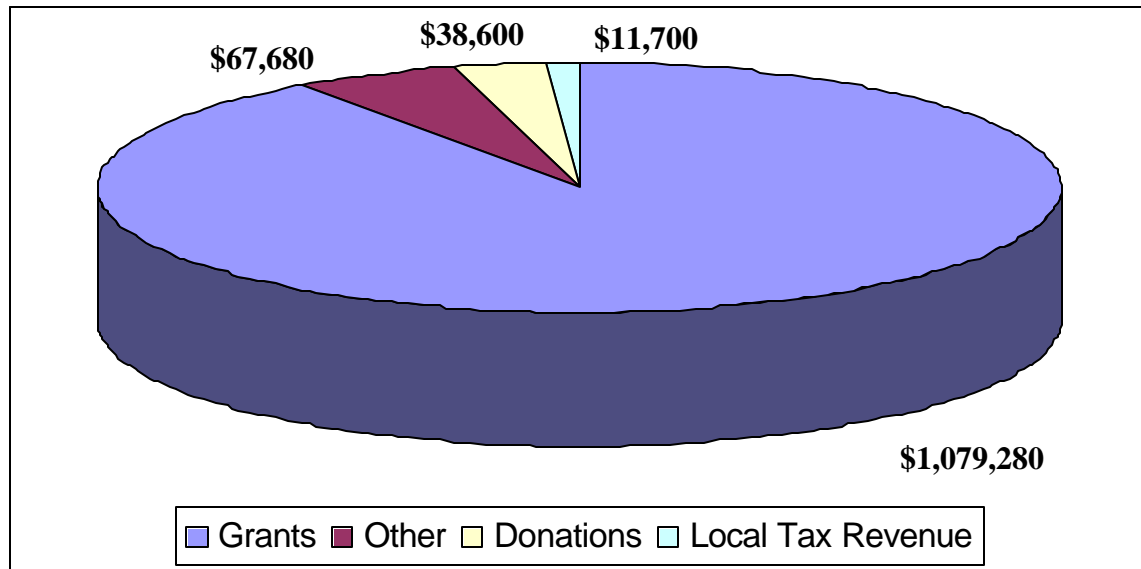
**Figure 7. Annual Operating Budgets and Enrollment**



**Figure 8. Cost per Student Annually**



**Figure 9. Additional Funding Received by Schools**



### Stakeholder Survey Generalizations

Four different surveys were administered to charter school stakeholders: parents, students, staff (defined as any employee of a charter school in direct contact with students), and district representatives (either superintendents or charter school liaisons). Table 6 gives the numbers of surveys returned for each group in each school (except for districts, where only one person from each was interviewed by phone) as well as the enrollment for each school. It is important to keep in mind that the number of surveys returned may or may not reflect the enrollment and staff numbers of the school. Also note that some of the information differs slightly from that found in the profiles. Percentages may not add to 100 because of rounding error or blank responses.

The researchers requested that schools administer the surveys to all staff and all students in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade or above, and that those surveys were to be postmarked by April 20. Parent surveys were to be returned by April 27. Those not received by May 11 are not included in the results. See individual school profiles for total enrollment and staff numbers, the Data Collection section for methodology, and Appendices B through E for the actual surveys.

**Table 6. Number of Surveys Returned**

School	Number of surveys returned			Enrollment
	Parents	Students	Staff	
Anser	55	48	12	112
Blackfoot	18	1	11	55
Coeur d'Alene	103	170	10	208
Lost Rivers	4	12	2	17
Meridian	72	113	11	143
Moscow	36	25	7	710
Nampa	83	132	9	266
Pocatello	16	57	10	<i>Not reported</i>
Renaissance	17	41	9	55
<b>Total</b>	<b>404</b>	<b>599</b>	<b>81</b>	

### Staff Survey

A total of 81 staff responded to the survey. Staff is defined as teachers, administrators, instructors, or other paid employees that have frequent direct contact with students. (In Year One of this study, only teachers and administrators were surveyed.) Fifty-six percent of respondents were teachers. Founders or original staff members comprised 54 percent of respondents.

The top five *reasons for working at the charter school* were:

- Educational program (70% rated this as a very important reason)
- Interested in being involved in an educational reform effort (67%)
- High emphasis on academics (65%)
- Safety/climate at school (64%)
- Opportunity to work with like-minded educators (60%)

Other motivating reasons for working at the charter school were:

- Working for a principal with strong leadership and management qualities
- To obtain a spot for my child to attend here
- Possible to work at the same school that my son attends
- The high reports about the charter school from professors at the university
- Opportunity to create an environment to allow professional educators to make the real decisions about educating children
- Opportunity to be a founding member and have a voice in design
- I was on the design team and wanted to see the school through
- Failure of the [conventional] public school system to address key issues
- Consistency in the educational program

Difficulty in finding other positions was rated as “not important” by the majority (72%) of respondents.

When asked whether the school met their initial expectation, 75 percent stated that it had done so. Concerns that were expressed included:

“Communication is very poor.”

“It has not been exactly as I hoped it would be, but I believe that once we have established a reputation for preparing students more adequately than [conventional] public schools, we will more closely approximate our stated goals.”

“I had expected that there would have been better support/training from SDE/chartering district in the policies/procedures necessary to set up a school.”

“I feel we are working without adequate financial support. This makes it very difficult to meet all the mandates and to meet our own goals.”

“I am very disappointed with the overall quality of students and fellow staff members, several of whom I do not believe truly share a desire to effect significant school reform.”

“Failure to Ensure teacher governance role has led to parent control of the board in violation of the charter.”

“Difficulty arriving at shared vision and arriving at shared ideas of evaluation.”

When asked about their *level of satisfaction* on a variety of aspects of the school, teachers rated these as the top five:

- Evaluation or assessment of teaching performance (88% stated they were either satisfied or very satisfied)
- Teacher collegiality (85%)
- School mission (83%)

- Overall school climate/environment (81%)
- Professional development opportunities (80%)

These responses are very similar to those found in the Year One report, with the exception of “teacher collegiality.” As charter schools continue to develop and teachers work together, teacher collegiality will continue to increase if teachers work together toward achieving the mission of their school.

When asked about the process by which they were evaluated, teachers described observations (formal as well as informal on a regular basis), checklists/rubrics, interviews, goal setting, videotaping and self-evaluation.

*Opportunities for staff development* included:

- Inservices offered by the district (e.g., on reading, discipline)
- Classes offered through the university
- Computer certification training classes and workshops
- National and local conferences, including the Department of Education’s portfolio workshop for charters
- Special education administrative training
- Onsite workshops for school specific programs (e.g., Intercept, Expeditionary Learning)
- Staff planning time
- Grant writing workshops
- Site visits of other charter schools
- None

The most negative satisfaction levels were related to resources available for instruction (33% were either “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with this aspect of their schools). Other top areas of dissatisfaction included the school building/facilities (30%) and salary level and benefits (26% and 24% respectively).

Eighty percent of staff agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements about their schools:

*About the students and the school*

- Students feel safe at this school. (A total of 89% either agreed or strongly agreed.)
- It is important for our school to be held accountable to its performance goals. (86%)
- There is good communication between the school and parents/guardians. (86%)
- The school has high standards and expectations for students. (85%)
- I think this school has a bright future. (83%)
- The quality of instruction is high. (83%)
- Staff reflects upon and evaluates the success of the school’s educational program on a regular basis. (82%)

- This school is meeting students' needs that could not be addressed at other local schools. (81%)
- This school reflects a community atmosphere. (81%)

#### *About parents*

- Parents can influence instructional and school activities. (82%)

#### *Teachers/Administrators about themselves*

- Teachers and school leadership are accountable for student achievement and performance. (93%)
- Teachers are autonomous and creative in their classes. (86%)
- Teachers are challenged to be effective. (84%)
- There is commitment to the mission of the school. (82%)

The majority of staff disagreed or strongly disagreed on several negatively worded statements:

- Teachers are disenchanted with what can be accomplished at this school. (79% disagreed or strongly disagreed.)
- Class sizes are too large to meet the needs of individual students. (78%)
- Teachers are insecure about their futures at the school. (68%)
- Lack of student discipline hinders my ability to teach and the opportunity for other students to learn. (67%)

Agreement was roughly split on the issue of whether support services were available to students and whether the schools had sufficient financial resources.

Two other areas that the survey addressed are special needs students and meeting of school missions:

- Seventy-two percent believe that their schools are serving students with special needs (this is up sharply from only half stating so in Year One).
- Seventy-five percent thought that their respective schools were meeting or exceeding their stated missions; approximately one-third of those thought the schools were exceeding their missions. These results are nearly identical to those in found in Year One.

The following are teachers' greatest perceived strengths and weaknesses of the schools. The most frequently mentioned strengths and weaknesses are starred:

#### *Strengths*

- = Administration/leadership
- = Commitment of staff and parents
- = Educational program
- Individualized attention for students
- Small classes
- Flexibility and innovation

#### *Weaknesses*

- = Facility
- = Funding
- = Administration/leadership
- Special education funding
- Failure of the board to act in compliance with the stated mission
- Heavy workload



- It is open to all students
- Parental involvement
- Cohesive staff
- Technology
- Alignment of subject areas and communication between teachers
- The culture
- Multiage class rooms
- The mission as articulated in the philosophy statement contained in the charter
- The people: staff, parents, students
- Trying to accomplish too much in a short time
- “Mission drift”
- Teacher burnout
- Non-supportive district
- Overly critical parents who are not willing to volunteer at the school
- Public misperceptions of what the school is about
- Students coming to the school for the wrong reason
- Misunderstandings about the school’s principles
- There are not enough of this type of school
- Weak local reputation

General comments about the schools included:

“If only local school districts can grant and/or renew charters there is little hope for true choice.”

“It seems absurd that the local district should decide how many students can enroll in a charter school that is by principle in ‘competition’ with their schools.”

“I hope the state and/or local communities can find an answer to the problem of no funding for facilities.”

“I really believe in the charter school concept.”

“If this school continues to go in the direction it is proceeding now, it will become a good school.”

“It is quite impressive how far the [school] has come in such a short time considering the number of years the ‘conventional’ public school system has been in existence.”

“We are charting new waters with direction, supplies, and support of our leaders, our parents, our students and each other.”

### ***Student Surveys***

A total of 600 students completed surveys this year, compared to 201 students last year. Table 7 shows the types of schools in which students were enrolled.

**Table 7. Types of Previous Enrollment**

<b>Type of school in which previously enrolled</b>	<b>Percentage of respondents</b>
Conventional public school	91%
Private/parochial school	35%
Home school	29%
Other (English schools)	7%
Alternative public school	5%
Another charter school	4%
Did not attend school	1%

Ninety percent of students reported that they had *previously attended* conventional public schools. Charter schools attracted 75 percent of their students back into public education from non-public educational arenas. Compared to last year's survey, this year's responses show that substantially more students had been previously enrolled in private/parochial schools (35% this year versus 11% last year) and home schools (29% this year versus 7% last year). Additionally, 7 percent of the students responded that they had been previously enrolled in "Other" types of schools compared to 1 percent of students last year.

The number one *reason for enrolling* in the charter school was because parents thought it would be a better school for their child. Other key reasons for enrollment were that the school is a comfortable place (40%), that parents and students had heard that the teachers were better (40%), and that the school had interesting things to do (37%).

When asked to list other reasons for choosing the school, students cited the following:

“We knew lots of people that came here.”

“I was getting into trouble over at the other school and I needed to get away from the trouble and I needed extra help.”

“It would give me a better education than most of the other schools would.”

“It seemed like this school would be safer than a lot of the other schools.”

“I had a lot of problems in public school, the learning process was too slow, and often repetitive...I wasn’t being challenged enough...I wasn’t getting good grades.”

“They are willing to let me work at my own pace.”

“It will give me better skills to attend the college I want to go to, and give me better skills for the work force.”

“I wanted better one-on-one attention...classes at the public school were too big so the teacher didn’t pay attention to me.”

“Wanted to get out of the public school environment...to get away from bullies...violence...kids doing drugs...bomb threats.”

Students were asked to rate statements about their schools. The top six statements with which at least 90 percent of students agreed or strongly agreed, are (in order of agreement):

- There are rules in the school we must follow. (96%)
- Teachers and administrators know me by my name. (95%)
- I feel safe at this school. (93%)
- My teacher is available to talk to me or help me when I need it. (92%)
- This school is doing a good job preparing me for the future. (90%)
- The school building is clean and well taken care of. (90%)

*Special needs:* Sixty three percent (63%) of students believe that their school helps all students learn, including those with special physical or learning needs. Twenty one percent (21%) said they did not know, while 6 percent of the students said that their school did not help all students learn.

The following comments are regarding the students' *greatest perceived strengths and weaknesses* of the schools:

#### *Strengths*

- I like my teachers—they care about us, they listen, they don't ignore your needs, and they challenge me beyond my average
- The style of learning is more interesting and teachers make learning fun
- I like the small school and the small classes
- We get a lot of say in a lot of things
- The students in attendance—they care for one another and have the ability to have intriguing conversations with one another
- There are more choices regarding classes in languages, computers
- I feel safe and don't have to worry about someone trying to hurt me at school

#### *Weaknesses*

- Don't have enough space for what we all want or need to do
- Not enough extra-curricular activities offered
- Not enough equipment for PE and sports or other resources like lockers, computers, bathrooms, or places to eat
- Extra classes are not available
- Students who cause trouble
- Teachers/staff who are ineffective at disciplining and aren't respectful to students
- Disorganization and lack of structure
- Hate wearing a uniform

Some students stated that strengths included the resources and small size, while others found their school decidedly lacking in resources and classes offered. Some students found the small size to be a detriment.

#### ***Parent Surveys***

A total of 462 parents completed surveys. The majority (71%) reported having one child enrolled in the charter school; nearly one-quarter had two children enrolled.

The *distance that families lived from the charter schools* ranged from less than one mile to 95 miles, with the average distance being 6 miles. Almost one-third of the students (31%) traveled two miles or less to the school. Twenty-seven percent (27%) live seven miles or more from the school.

Parents rated the following as the top five *reasons why they sent their children to the charter school*. At least three-fourths of parents rated these as "very important":

- Good teachers and high quality instruction (92%)
- Educational program (91%)
- Unique opportunities for my child at the charter school (87%)

- Academic reputation (high standards) of this school (83%)
- I prefer the emphasis and educational philosophy of this school (83%)

An open-ended question solicited these responses as other reasons for selecting that school:

- Smaller class size with low student-to-teacher ratio
- Emphasis on technology and other special classes (foreign languages such as Spanish and Latin, theater, piano lessons, career opportunities, etc.)
- Dress code and uniforms
- Active parent involvement and the availability of the teachers to the parents as well as the teacher's willingness to work with individual parents
- Motivated teachers and administrators
- High education standards and academic accountability
- Children anxious to attend the charter school
- Discipline, respect and other character traits that are emphasized

Ninety-four percent of parents stated that they were familiar with their *school's mission*. After reading a copy of the mission statement (which was attached to the each school's survey), a total of 84 percent of parents believed that the school was *meeting or exceeding its mission*; over one-third of those thought the school was exceeding its mission.

Ninety-four percent of parents stated the charter school had met *initial expectations*. The comments of those who answered "yes" regarding expectations being met included:

- Wonderful "tuned in" teachers and staff who have high standards that the children meet.
- Mixed: exceeded in areas of philosophy, but not yet realized.
- The great effort from the staff and administrators who do all they can to help the children.
- The sense of community and teaching excellence.
- My child is learning how to learn. She will succeed anywhere.
- The school has been responsive to the needs of the children and has given them individual attention and support when needed.

Those who felt the charter school had not met their initial expectations commented as follows:

- Previous principal was difficult to deal with.
- It has taken time to develop the expeditious process. The concept is good, but the practice is still growing.
- Classroom instruction still impacted by severely "conservative" community (e.g. human body systems project won't cover the reproductive system).

In rating *satisfaction*, at least 90 percent of parents were either satisfied or very satisfied with the following aspects of the schools:

- Potential for parent involvement (97%)
- Educational program (97%)

- Teachers and other school staff (96%)
- Progress toward meeting school's mission (96%)
- Overall school climate/environment (95%)
- Standards and expectations (94%)
- Class sizes (93%)
- Their child's academic achievements (92%)
- Administrative leadership (91%)
- School stability (91%)

Parents were least satisfied with extracurricular activities and physical facilities (30% each) and school resources (20%) of parents stating that they were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with these aspects of their schools.

Parents were asked to rate their agreement with several statements about their charter schools. Over 90 percent agreed or strongly agreed that:

- The quality of instruction is high (97%)
- The school is supporting innovative practice (95%)
- My child is motivated to learn (92%)
- The school is meeting my child's needs (92%)
- My child receives sufficient individual attention (91%)
- Parents have the ability to influence the direction of the school (90%)

Another statement with which parents agreed or strongly agreed (89%) was that "teachers and school leadership are accountable for student achievement and performance." Parents were roughly split on whether support services (e.g., counseling, health care, etc.) were available for their children.

When asked about whether they thought the school was meeting the needs of *special needs students*, only 38 percent said "yes". Forty percent of parents said they did not know, and 17 percent said special needs did not apply to their school. Five percent of parents believed that special needs were not being addressed.

Parents reported a variety of *types of involvement* with their schools. Their contributions are shown in Table 8. Most involvement took the form of classroom volunteering.

**Table 8. Types of Parent Involvement**

Percentage of Parents	Type of Involvement
7%	Planning/founder
17%	School committee member
5%	Board member
50%	Classroom volunteer
24%	Other
24%	None

“Other” involvement included:

- Box Top Coordinator
- Chaperone Parties/School Dance
- Club Sponsor
- Custodian
- Donations of money, books, snacks, art supplies
- Field trips
- Fund raising, Grant writing
- Librarian
- Parent Organization/Parent Advisory Committee/PTA/PTO/PVO
- Playground Monitor/Supervisor
- Office Assistance
- Serve lunch
- Special speaker
- Sports
- Staff
- Student Led Conference Programs
- Substitute for Personnel
- Summer car wash
- Supportive parent
- Staff
- Technical Support
- Web Site Work/Technology Support
- Yard work

One parent wrote “(I) attempted to be involved, but my efforts were rebuked!” (The charter schools have encountered varying amounts of parent involvement, and, at times, have found parents overly-involved.)

When asked about their greatest perceived strength, the parents overwhelmingly answered the dedicated, caring, committed teachers and staff. The following are a few select quotes from the parents regarding their appreciation of the staff:

- The English teacher continues to stretch the minds of his students.
- Teacher’s innovative ways of teaching. Rewarding students when they demonstrate they are “thinking”.
- Teachers love what they are teaching and the children can tell.
- The teachers are willing to help each student individually before or after school. From the principal down to the staff, everyone is interested in each student doing their best.
- Staff commitment to educational excellence.
- The teachers are there because they want to be and it shows in their teaching and direction with the children.
- The excitement the teachers express to the students about learning.
- Teachers get to know their students.
- The closeness of the students and teachers. No one is an outsider unless they would like to be.
- The people—the attitude of the staff towards the children is wonderful. There is a genuine feeling of respect between child and adult that goes both directions.
- The teachers are concerned about the children and that they are learning and understanding what is being taught.
- The teachers are all excited about teaching and they all strive for nothing less than excellence! They are so motivated, they motivate our children. Thanks to the charter school, our children will be lifetime learners.

The following comments are regarding the other perceived strengths of the schools:

- Small class size.
- Willingness to work to meet individual needs. Students are allowed to go at their own rate of progression and are not held back with the rest of the class or be forced to be with the class when they are not ready. The focus is on each child's individual learning. Each student is challenged at his or her own level. The school encourages teaching styles to keep the students moving at their own rate and to help each student make education a positive factor.
- Lots of parental involvement. Parents are made to feel like an important asset to the school's success—not like unwanted intruders like I have felt in other schools. Volunteers have large roles so children can see parental priorities on their education.
- Its leadership—both administration and teachers—are available and willing to listen to my concerns. The principal does an excellent job of managing the school. She has high expectations and then helps the students and teachers to meet those expectations.
- A commitment to academic excellence with high standards, expectations and accountability.
- An emphasis on technology and a curriculum based on computers. Teaching technologies keeps pace with the work place to prepare its graduates for the world of work.
- The atmosphere and the feeling of an extended family environment. The students seem to show respect towards the teachers and others. The attitude of the staff towards the children is also wonderful. There is a genuine feeling of respect between child and adult that goes both directions.

Similar to the results from last year's survey, "facilities" was the most frequently mentioned weakness. This corresponds to the dissatisfaction mentioned by parents in another section of the survey. Other weaknesses included:

- Lack of adequate funding—not enough money to do the things that need to be done.
- Lack of extracurricular sports and activities. No opportunities to be involved in electives such as art, music, band, choirs, drama, home economics, foreign languages, etc.
- Need more choices as far as honors classes and gifted programs.
- Not enough physical education and no gym or shower facilities.
- Lack of technology and computer resources.
- Lack of support by the school board.
- Lack of resources and supplies.
- Lack of a library.
- No bus—lack of transportation.

The following are additional selected quotes. It is interesting to note that many parents do not appear to see their charter schools as public schools.

"Our charter school is a great school—far superior to our local public school."



“Our public schools would do well to take direction from the charter schools.”

“In question 10, I marked that I felt the school is meeting the performance goals of the school. I am very pleased with what the school has accomplished and I wanted to say EXCEEDS in all categories, but they chose very high goals to start with. I don’t think you can exceed those goals; just meeting them is a great achievement.”

“This school is an excellent alternative to the local public school. Standards are high and the quality staff does an excellent job of reaching each student where he is and encouraging him to success.”

“If the state allows the charter school format, it should also provide a mechanism for funding/financing or provide the facility. Otherwise, a great deal of energy is expended in start-up problems and making sure they have a roof over their head. It is admirable that this charter is working through these problems while still providing quality education to its students.”

### **Technical Assistance Needs**

During their participation in the surveys, staff was asked to check any areas of technical assistance that are needed at the schools. Table 9 shows the percentage of respondents’ expressed needs. The areas in which the highest needs were expressed are school finance/budgeting, community relations, improving facilities, governance and leadership, program evaluation, personnel issues, and charter renewal.

**Table 9. Areas of Expressed Need**

<b>Expressed Need</b>	<b>Percentage Citing</b>
School finance/budgeting	75
Community relations	75
Improving facilities	63
Governance and leadership	56
Program evaluation	56
Personnel issues	53
Charter renewal	53
Regulatory issues	30
Accreditation	22
Alignment of curriculum with state standards	0

Other areas of expressed need were assessment and working with the district.

### ***District Surveys***

Of the eight districts with charter schools, seven responded to the request to be interviewed by phone. One district repeatedly stated that no one in the district was

familiar enough with its charter school, or the state law, to make informed statements. Six of the seven districts each have one charter school operating within their bounds; the seventh has two. Respondents were either district superintendents or charter school liaisons.

#### *Charters as laboratories for innovation*

When asked to what extent they thought that charter schools were, in general, “laboratories” for innovation, most respondents saw charters as somewhat innovative. Two saw them as not at all innovative. Respondents did note that levels of innovation varied from charter to charter.

#### *Impact on district schools*

None of the districts have made modifications to their curriculum or to course offerings based on what the charter schools are doing. Two of the schools have changed their marketing as a result of having a charter in their district. When asked about specific impacts on their districts, respondents’ top three items were loss of a particular kind of student, redistribution of office administration and changes in the community. All impacts were rated as having mild to moderate impacts. Other impacts included loss of financing, loss of students (in general), increasing challenge predicting enrollment, staff morale and divisiveness in the community.

Open-ended comments varied widely. Others commented on growing resentment “because [charters] manage the budgets for federal/state supported monies (e.g., Title 1, Special Education) and the charter schools have access to these monies without putting in the time and energy to either procure the money or manage it” and that the charter school “takes up a lot of the superintendent’s time.” A few of the districts commented that the changes have been positive, and even intentional. Respondents noted that impacts on their respective districts would be inversely proportional to a change in its size.

#### *Types of Students*

When asked if charter schools seemed to attract certain types of students, responses varied from “not at all” to “definitely.” Questions were posed regarding higher performing students, charters as “dumping grounds,” and socioeconomic and racial segregation. One respondent stated that “test scores show that the schools don’t necessarily attract higher performing students but do tend to attract parents who want to be involved more.”

#### *Parent Involvement*

The majority (five) of districts say they have analyzed how they give their parents a voice. Several stated that they were doing this before there were charters.

#### *Increasing Competition*

When asked if creating a competitive work environment leads to school improvement, respondents had varied responses once again. Most did think that there would be an increase in the number of charters in their district. One respondent hopes to use charter legislation to increase charters in her district to expand the offerings to their students. She

also thought that charters should provide something that's more difficult to offer than conventional public schools currently offer (e.g., opportunities to excel in specific skills such as technology and communication; health occupations; tourism; hotel management and culinary arts, etc.).

Conversely, another respondent stated that charter schools started off on the wrong foot with their peers by saying, "we're starting this school because we're offering things [the district] can't offer." He believes that this turned out not to be true and that charters should try to re-phrase public statements so as not to ostracize teacher peers.

One superintendent believes that the concept of charter schools comes out of dissatisfaction with the conventional public school system and that the charter school movement is an effort of people saying "listen to us." He believes that, in essence, every school should be a charter school, though he doesn't like the elitism that comes out of it. He does feel that conventional public schools can accomplish innovative things though there is a need for more collaboration. Also, conventional public schools have difficulty demanding parent involvement. Since this is one of the greatest strengths of charter schools, they may help stimulate conventional public schools' parent/community involvement.



## Site Visit

The site visit to Blackfoot Charter School (BCS), the newest charter school in Idaho, occurred on May 4, 2001. While its educational program and philosophy are unique, the experience of BCS is somewhat similar to experiences of other charter schools that were visited during the first year of this program evaluation. These commonalities include parent involvement, small size, and leadership issues. Please refer to *Idaho Charter Schools: Program Evaluation Report, Year One* (NWREL, 2000) for more detailed information about Idaho's other charter schools and common issues.

### BLACKFOOT CHARTER SCHOOL

Blackfoot Charter School (BCS) is a small school located in the center of Blackfoot. Students begin their day by meeting all together in a large downstairs room for a community meeting. The meetings include songs and stories on one of the "Cheetah values" that help define the school culture. Each multiage classroom (there are three) has students ranging from Kindergarten through fifth grade. Rather than working "at grade levels," students move more fluidly through "learning levels." At times, students move to different classrooms for instruction that suits their needs. For example, students may move to another classroom for math instruction. A student can move to another learning group based on his or her need.

One of the unique aspects of BCS is its use of the Intercept Program to assist at-risk students (about half of all students). Students are pulled out of regular classes several times a week to individually work on exercises designed to increase their focus and concentration. While this program has been used in schools around the country for over a decade, it is not currently being used in any other public schools in Blackfoot.

When parents were asked what they like about the charter school, they overwhelmingly responded that they appreciated that their children worked at their own pace. They reported that their students were more motivated than they were at previous schools, which included private and other public schools alike. Several parents had also home schooled their children and were considering continuing this practice until the charter school was established last Fall. Another key element that parents enjoy is character development through the Cheetah values system. Several parents also stated that there was no perception among students about who was "better" or "smarter" since there was so much movement among groups. Parents felt that this lack of competitiveness and put-downs made for a much more comfortable environment than was found in other public schools.

A core group of parents is very involved with the school. They helped select the curriculum, they are included in staff development, they assist teachers in the classrooms and work with students in reading groups. The school librarian is a parent volunteer.

BCS' relationship with the local school district is positive yet not entirely supportive. The charter itself took two years to get approved, and an appeal to expand the BCS to include

grade six is pending (approval seemed unlikely at the time of my visit). Several parents noted that if the district did not approve, over half of the now-fifth-graders would be home schooled next year rather than attend the sixth-grade only school that is offered at the district. However, the district is finding ways to work with the charter school, and charter leaders noted a positive change in attitude since the school first began operation.

When asked about the perception that the community had that the charter school might be “elitist” (as has been the perception in other communities in Idaho) both teachers and parents were quick to point out that BCS seemed to attract a high number of special needs students. The school’s commitment to working with such students (e.g., students who were behind grade level in reading) was the very thing that attracted parents to the school. Parents stated that they felt it was important to attract families that are interested in BCS’ philosophy and vision. The school advertises in the local newspaper and also asks parents to hand out flyers to families that they think may be interested.

The school has not been without challenges. Two of the three teachers are in their first year of the profession and had little guidance during the first few months of operation. No curriculum had been adopted early on, and teachers had to set everything up “from scratch.” Funding for the school was originally based on an anticipated 24 students, while enrollment rocketed to 55 at the start of the school year. Teachers were promised two full-time instructional aides per classroom when they agreed to teach at the school only to find no aides at all. (Finally, in February of this year, teachers were given part-time aides to assist them with the learning needs in their rooms.) These factors, along with lack of effectiveness on the part of the first administration, resulted in chaos. The first administrator was asked to leave the school mid-year.

Things have improved greatly since the arrival of the new part-time administrator: behavior problems have decreased and the vision of the school is coming more clearly into focus for those working most closely with the students. Practice has become much more consistent among all three classrooms. Some curriculum has been adopted (e.g., Saxon math), and the entire curriculum will be revisited this summer. Another goal is to align curriculum with upcoming state academic standards.

Teachers feel that teaching at the charter is more difficult than they thought it would be because so many of the children are “high need.” The spread of Kindergarten through fifth grade is particularly challenging, since some students are behind grade level and some are very advanced. Despite the challenges of working in a K-5 classroom, teachers note that the multiage configuration results in greater patience among students than in single-grade classrooms. The school is considering creating less of an age span within classrooms.

The school has also been attempting to implement “learning labs,” which are individualized stations where students participate at their own learning levels. The student-centered labs provide enrichment of what students are already learning in the classroom and are based on brain research. Teachers will act as facilitators for student learning rather than providing direct instruction. The hope is that the labs will ease the

pressure of having too many small groups within a class. The challenge has been for teachers to actually implement the concept of learning labs without sufficient example of what labs look like in practice.

Like many charter schools, BCS has its share of facilities issues. The historic building in which the school is housed is currently undergoing costly renovation. An asbestos abatement has kept the “gym” area off limits. The administration is considering another location for the school, though there is some commitment to the owner of the current building.

The BCS community realizes that accountability is the key to their success. The school is clarifying performance objectives for students, including the formalization of its current practice of quarterly goal-setting for each child.





## Conclusions and Recommendations

The three guiding questions of this study as well as the charter school law itself will be used to focus on the progress of Idaho Charter Schools.

1. *Did the charter schools accomplish what they proposed, based on their mission and goals?*

Schools continue to make progress on their goals. The goals are primarily student-centered, though there are others that address staff development, attendance/retention and student/teacher ratio. Eighty-one percent of the goals of the charter schools are either being met or exceeded, up from approximately two-thirds of the goals in Year One. All schools have either met or exceeded some of their goals. Some schools are also modifying their goals to increase measurability and accountability and to align them with existing state standards.

Parents were less likely than school staff, percentage-wise, to state that their respective charter schools were meeting their goals. It is possible that schools are not adequately communicating their successes in relation to their goals.

2. *Did their students meet the achievement levels proposed in their charter school applications?*

This guiding question addresses the first intent of the charter law, “to improve student learning.”

Of the 66 goals established by the charter schools, over half (38) are related to student achievement. The majority of these goals were reported as having been met or exceeded. One school created a new set of goals this year and was therefore unable to report on progress.

The sixth intent of the charter law is to “hold the school... accountable for meeting measurable student educational standards.” Staff are certainly aware of this expectation (93 percent stated that they believed they are accountable). Many of the student achievement goals are measured with standardized test data or use portfolio demonstration to show learning. However, some measurements of the charter school goals are still fairly subjective (e.g., “staff opinion”). Other measures do not tie directly to goals of student achievement (e.g., measuring student learning of skills by virtue of offering courses or materials). Still, accountability has increased in the last year. Charter school representatives from nearly all schools have been working collectively on portfolio assessment to track student growth. The assessment is based on the Idaho Direct Writing Assessment and will likely be expanded to include the Direct Mathematics Assessment.

Seventy-three percent of teachers were satisfied or very satisfied with student achievement levels. This is down somewhat from satisfaction levels in Year One (in which 85 percent were satisfied or very satisfied). Though the reason for the decline is

unclear, it is possible that teachers are becoming accustomed to their students, expectations are very high (85 percent agreed or strongly agreed with this), and/or many have more higher needs students than previously.

### *3. What makes charter schools in Idaho unique?*

Shared philosophy and small size continue to be two factors that make charters unique in comparison to conventional public schools. Each school has its own unique mission that was developed by founders and is generally known throughout the school. Missions usually address the educational program or philosophy espoused by the school. Over 80 percent of staff believe that there is commitment to the missions of their schools. In cases where teachers were not accepting of the philosophy, the teachers often left the school rather than staying on and attempting to isolate themselves. The second and third intents of the charter law are to “increase learning opportunities for all students with special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for all students” and “include the use of different and innovative teaching methods.” The schools have adopted a multitude of programs (see Education Programs, pages 10-11 ). The programs in and of themselves may or may not be unique (some are pre-packaged curricula); however, the programs are adopted school-wide and they fit in with the philosophy and mission of the school (rather than being adopted for the sake of adopting something new and easy to use). The programs are also providing a variety of opportunities for students. Teachers reported being very satisfied with the collegiality of schools, and this certainly assists in increasing consistency of methods across classrooms within a particular school.

Relatively small size and low teacher-to-student ratios have been a unique factor of the charter schools. The small size is perceived generally as a positive feature of the schools, though some students, particularly those in older grades who have had previous experience with greater anonymity, find the small school communities oppressive. Small size also impacts possibilities of extracurricular programs, since funding is primarily a function of attendance/enrollment.

Idaho charters are also unique because of the high number of students on waiting lists. Waiting lists are nearly matching enrollment. Unlike conventional public schools, the charters may designate a maximum number of students that they accept each year. Often this is necessary because of facility limitations. Charter schools are providing “parents and students with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available with the public school system,” another intent of the charter law, though to a limited extent. Enrollment is up 14 percent since last year. Slow growth of the number of charter schools, while beneficial on one hand because it allows for some control, is not keeping up with the high demand for educational options.

Another unique opportunity for charter schools is flexibility in scheduling. Two charters are now on year-round schedules. Another has increased its calendar year nearly two weeks more than its district.

An interesting surge in the student population is the number of students that were previously home schooled. Nearly one-third (29%) of parents surveyed stated that their students were home schooled prior to enrolling in a charter school. Charter schools are bringing in an ever-increasing number of home schoolers into the public system.

### **Additional conclusions**

The state charter law intended the schools to “create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunity to be responsible for the learning program at the school site.” Many teachers reported that they were able to creative in their classrooms and that they were “challenged to be effective.” There were many opportunities for staff development, including onsite workshops, classes, staff planning time and district inservices.

Charter schools are striving to meet the needs of a wide variety of students. In terms of special education, eight schools reported providing special education services to students, and eight schools now have special education certified staff. More staff (79%) did note this year that their respective schools are addressing the needs of their special education students. However, only two schools reported having an equal or greater percentage of special education students than their districts. Thirteen percent of parents also stated, in their survey responses, that special education did not apply to their school. This tells of the lack of understanding that many have regarding the public nature of the schools, i.e., that the schools are open to all students regardless of their needs. Diversity in other areas of student demographics varies among schools; most have fewer minority students than their conventional counterparts. Over half of the charters have fewer free/reduced lunch students than their counterparts; this may be because of lack of identification of students as such.

A variety of student services are available to most charter school students. Hot lunch is being provided by six schools, five of which provide it five times per week. Four of these schools serve a greater population of free and reduced lunch qualified students than their districts, in terms of percent of total student body. Most of the schools have access to a school bus, though whether the routes are able to serve most students in those schools remains in question.

Not surprisingly, as charter schools are in existence longer, it becomes easier for them to see themselves with greater clarity. Schools that have been in operation for two or three years are now refocusing on their goals and examining their curriculum and tightening up loose areas. There have been a few changes in leadership in the schools, and in all cases this appears to have been positive. In terms of relationships with the sponsors, many districts did not appear concerned or even interested in their local charter schools. Some were upset with what they saw as unfair attention and resources being given to charter schools and not to their conventional public schools. Attempts are being made by both schools and districts to work together on issues.

To summarize the key factors that continue to contribute to the success of Idaho charters are:

- Small size, both as a school and in student-to-teacher ratios
- Parent involvement
- Teacher commitment and shared philosophy
- Efforts to work positively with the sponsoring district
- Strong administrative leadership

These factors must be considered by future start-ups, and they will also be beneficial to the conventional public schools.

A few trends have begun to surface in the second year of the Idaho Charter School Program evaluation:

- Improvement in accountability
- Increase in number of home schoolers entering the public system
- Continued difficulty with facilities
- Increase in the variety of programs offered to students
- Increase in student services

Data from subsequent years will continue plot the progress that charter schools are making with student achievement and as independent organizations.

## **Recommendations**

### ***Measurement of Accomplishments***

While there has been some improvement since last year, schools must continue tightening up on measurable goals. Without this, it will continue to be difficult to clearly demonstrate what is happening with accountability in charter schools.

### ***Sponsoring Agency***

Charter school start-ups in Idaho still only have the option of chartering through their local districts. Since the intent of the law is to provide expanded choices to parents and students, it may become necessary to allow for alternative chartering options given the slow rate of growth of charter schools in Idaho.

### ***Public Awareness of Charter Schools***

Two issues have unfolded with regard to public awareness. One is the issue of public awareness that charter schools are public schools. Many parents and teachers alike describe their charters as “better than the public schools,” implying that charters are not public in the same way as conventional schools, if at all. The other issue is general awareness of opportunities provided by charters. Much of the general public is still unclear about what charter schools are (or can be), and many tend to think of them only as “alternative schools” for at-risk students.

### ***Evaluation Process***

Because this study is only as complete as the data that is made available allows, it is essential that the charter schools participate as fully as possible. A few schools did not

report data in several key profile areas, making it impossible to report comprehensively about the charter school program. It may be necessary to shift data collection to a better time of year for schools in order to increase participation. Another area that is critical is parent surveys. Schools may or may not be communicating the importance of utilizing that opportunity for parents to have a voice in what happens with charter schools (rather than viewing it as “another government mandate”). The greater number of stakeholder surveys that are received, the better the quality of the data, thus the better the understanding of satisfaction and concern. Timing might also be adjusted to allow schools to administer surveys on their own schedules in order to meet other (internal) evaluation requirements and to discourage duplication of effort.

